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Remembering Those Who Came Before at Naval Hospital Bremerton

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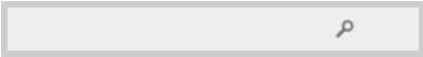
From the Boxer Rebellion in China at the turn of the 20th century to the jungles of Vietnam in 1968, 22 Navy hospital corpsmen have been recipients of the Medal of Honor for their unrelenting perseverance, steadfast courage and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of extreme personal danger.



Entrusted with the ceremonial pair of dog tags, Hospitalman Austin Robbins, a Colville, Wash. native, and Naval Hospital Bremerton Color Guard member, takes part in helping to remember Medal of Honor recipient Hospital Apprentice Fred H. McGuire, one of 22 corpsmen who were recognized with the nation's highest military honor. Leading up to the Hospital Corps 116th birthday on June 17, NHB is remembering those 22 corpsmen, many who gave their lives saving others on the field of battle. During every morning colors on regular work days, NHB's Color Guard will formally carry a set of dog tags as they raise the flag to symbolize the sacrifice of the Medal of Honor recipient. The dog tags are then solemnly placed on a framed citation for all to view.

(Photo by Douglas H Stutz)

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The 22 carried out their assigned duties, and then some, from the carnage of the Western Front in France during the First World War, to the bloody island hopping campaign in the Pacific Theater of World War Two, and from the frozen war zones in the Korean War to jungle fighting in the Vietnam War, as well as several conflicts in isolated locales that many people might not have ever heard about.

“The Corpsmen Ball Committee selected to do these mini ceremonies for 22 days as a way to dedicate a day to the remembrance of each corpsman that has gone before us and through back breaking work made the corpsmen rate what it is today. Sometimes people need a reminder that they are stronger than they think and are able to overcome any obstacle. The intentions of this 22 day evolution is to instill pride in our junior Sailors and remind our senior Sailors that we serve in one of the most decorated corps in the Navy and should be proud everyday for that opportunity,” explained Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class (Fleet Marine Force) Mark Litz.



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(Photo by Douglas H Stutz)

Fittingly, the first hospital corpsman and Navy medical representative to ever receive the nation's highest military honor was quietly and reverently acknowledged. Hospital Apprentice Robert H. Stanley, who retired as a Chief Pharmacist, distinguished himself several times under enemy fire volunteering to carry messages between the American and British legations during the Boxer Rebellion at Beijing, China in June, 1900. He was 19 years old at the time.

“I applaud our Corpsmen Ball Committee for their efforts to remind us all on the supreme sacrifice from the 22 Medal of Honor corpsmen. Many, if not all, gave their lives to save others,” commented Capt. Christopher Quarles, Naval Hospital Bremerton Commanding Officer.

Next recipient recognized was Hospital Apprentice First Class William Zuiderveld, who was assigned to the battleship USS Florida in the U.S. intervention in Vera Cruz, Mexico in 1914. During the seizure of that city, he displayed “extraordinary heroism” while performing his professional duty. Zuiderveld braved incoming gunfire by rushing to help a seriously wounded shipmate who was shot in the head. He stemmed the bleeding and carried the injured Sailor back out of the direct line of fire.

“I think doing this is such a great idea. You can see the differences in the write-ups from last century to the more recent ones. I'm looking forward every day to the ‘next chapter,’” said Laurie Gonzalez of NHB Information Management Department.

At NHB on every Friday morning, as many staff members as possible due to clinical and departmental responsibilities assemble on the quarterdeck for morning colors, which is then followed by the traditional pledge of allegiance and any award ceremony added to the schedule.



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For May 23, Hospital Apprentice Fred H. McGuire was recognized.

On September 24, 1911, McGuire was part of a shore party from the gunboat USS Pampanga ordered to capture a force of Moros warriors on Basilan, located off Mindanao in the southern stretches of the Philippine archipelago. As the scout party approached their objective – the village of Mundang – the Moros sprung an effective surprise attack. McGuire responded to the call for help and emptied his rifle at the enemy, and when his ammunition was depleted, he used his rifle as a club in fierce close-quarter combat. Despite being wounded in the battle, he immediately helped his dying leader and other wounded crewmembers until (additional) help arrived. For his action on this occasion, he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Handling the honor of carrying the dog tags as part of the Color Guard team and then placing them on the framed citation was Hospitalman Austin Robbins.

“This is really a great way to remember all of these corpsmen who gave their all. They are all part of the historical legacy of our rate. Remembering each one individually shows us what it takes to get it done when faced with overwhelming odds. As a history buff, I have taken the time to read all the citations on display on the third floor, I know I have the training and I just hope I also have what it takes if ever faced with being in such a situation,” commented Robbins, a Colville, Wash. native who brought previous experience to NHB as a volunteer on a command flag detail where he served on ceremonial guard at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, Washington, DC.

According to Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Alexander Henry Bransdorf, the leading petty officer Peri-operative services, the initial idea went from abstract notion to practical application in the Hospital Corps ball committee meetings with HM1 Vincent Kucera and Litz helping with the overall coordination.

“Besides the obvious honoring of those who are the epitome of the valor of the Hospital Corps, it is a great way to show the proud lineage that today’s hospital corpsman encompass, whether that is on a gray hull out to sea or in the deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq or back taking care of the fleet at one of the shore based installations,” explained Bransdorf, of Lake Stevens, Wash., citing that recognizing the 22 recipients also gets the other enlisted rates stationed at NHB involved and aware of the tradition and history of corpsmen.

“These men paved the way and set the standard for hospital corpsman to operate. Should every HM strive to be a Medal of Honor recipient? No, but when you read these citations and get a sense of “wow,” any corpsman, whether an HR fresh to the fleet or the most senior HMCM, should strive to be the best possible. These men were the forerunners in the HM rate and really set the bar,” stated Bransdorf.

Bransdorf, with approximately 12 years in the Navy, attests that by honoring those who have come before, there is a definite sense of pride felt being a part of the corpsmen lineage and what the rating has accomplished in time of peace and in time of war.

“It is important to honor the legacy for many reasons, but the most important is that these men went far above the standard call of duty. These men earned the nation’s highest military award and they deserved to be recognized, perhaps more than just once a year during the Hospital Corps ball timeframes. A legacy cannot be continued if the past falls by the wayside,” said Bransdorf.

If there is a collective component of NHB that perhaps daily understands what it means to have paid the ultimate sacrifice and be recognized with the nation’s highest military honor, it would be Branch Health Clinic Everett, with Medal of Honor recipient Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class David R. Ray as the namesake of their clinic.

Ray was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor (posthumously) for his actions during the Vietnam War at Phu Loc 6 near An Hoa in Quang Nam Province, Republic of Vietnam, on March 19, 1969. BHC Everett, commissioned in 2002, is located within the David R. Ray Health Center.

When Cmdr. Doug Stephens was BHC Everett’s officer in charge, he guided the clinic staff into expanding their efforts in remembering Ray, which has included heartfelt comments from Ray’s family, as well as shared sentiment from another hospital corpsman who served alongside Ray during the Vietnam War.

“What we did was actually spoke to some Marines that served with David R. Ray and a corpsman who was in Da Nang when his body was flown in after getting killed. We also spoke with and communicated with his sister and nephew on a regular basis to let them know what we were doing to honor her brother and Uncle. We (also) initiated a 5K run where all proceeds (\$648) went to the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund,” shared Stephens, noting that the clinic initiated a corpsman cup event to

compete on basic medical skills and the winner earned the “HM2 David R. Ray Top Doc Competition.”

The competition is another way for BHC Everett staff to keep the memory alive of Ray, who would have turned 69 on Feb 14, by what he accomplished as a corpsman and by his sacrifice on the field of battle.

The top doc competition involved professional and practical testing such as what Ray learned in honing his corpsman skills over 40 years ago. The goal of the competition wasn’t to replicate that fateful day on a blood-soaked patch of ground in Vietnam, but to bring a hands-on sense of urgency and realism in a training environment.

“Not a bad start for the first time. Our enlisted staff did a very good job and overall we got some great training done. I think HM2 Ray would have been pleased,” said Hospital Corpsman Master Chief Michael Garrison, BHC Everett Senior Enlisted Leader.

“At my change of charge ceremony with Lt. Cmdr. Willie Carter, the last page of the ceremony program has a handwritten note from David R. Ray to his family. Sadly, two weeks later, he was killed,” said Stephens.

BHC Everett reads the citation of Ray every year on his Feb. 14 birthday: *“For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a HM2 with Battery D, 2d Battalion, at Phu Loc 6, near An Hoa. During the early morning hours, an estimated battalion-sized enemy force launched a determined assault against the battery’s position, and succeeded in effecting a penetration of the barbed-wire perimeter. The initial burst of enemy fire caused numerous casualties among the Marines who had immediately manned their howitzers during the rocket and mortar attack. Undaunted by the intense hostile fire, HM2 Ray moved from parapet to parapet, rendering emergency medical treatment to the wounded. Although seriously wounded himself while administering first aid to a Marine casualty, he refused medical aid and continued his lifesaving efforts. While he was bandaging and attempting to comfort another wounded marine, HM2 Ray was forced to battle two enemy soldiers who attacked his position, personally killing one and wounding the other. Rapidly losing his strength as a result of his severe wounds, he nonetheless managed to move through the hail of enemy fire to other casualties. Once again, he was faced with the intense fire of oncoming enemy troops and, despite the grave personal danger and insurmountable odds, succeeded in treating the wounded and holding off the enemy until he ran out of ammunition, at which time he sustained fatal wounds. HM2 Ray’s final act of heroism was to protect the patient he was treating. He threw himself upon the wounded Marine, thus saving the man’s life when an enemy grenade exploded nearby. By his determined and persevering actions, courageous spirit, and selfless devotion to the welfare of his marine comrades, HM2 Ray served to inspire the men of Battery D to heroic efforts in defeating the enemy. His conduct throughout was in keeping with the finest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service.”*

Along with the hospital corpsmen who have received the Medal of Honor, NHB also prominently displays those who have received the Navy Cross, including four posthumously, and 29 from the Vietnam War, 65 from World War Two and 57 from World War One. Unbeknownst to many, one of the Navy Cross recipients from the Vietnam War, Warren Work, is a recently retired NHB staff member and has a road on the command, ‘Work Way,’ named after him.

Like those recognized with the Medal of Honor, Navy Cross recipients at NHB are visibly identified as a part of the historical fabric of not only the hospital corpsmen rate, but also Naval Hospital Bremerton, Navy Medicine and the U.S. Navy. And for this special time leading up to the Corpsmen Ball, 22 of them are being remembered above and beyond the norm. Which is exactly what those corpsmen did in the line of duty.



About vjohnson